

UNIONE INTERNAZIONALE DEGLI ISTITUTI DI
ARCHEOLOGIA, STORIA E STORIA DELL'ARTE IN ROMA

Il patrimonio culturale tra tutela e ricerca

Cultural Heritage between Conservation and Research

Atti del convegno internazionale
Roma, 30-31 gennaio 2006

a cura di
Michel Gras e Paolo Liverani



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ADRIANO LA REGINA*

CULTURAL HERITAGE IN ITALY: BETWEEN CONSERVATION AND RESEARCH

Current Italian legislation can be traced back to the beginning of the last century, but it gathers together several principles established by the component states prior to Italy's unification, which took place in 1870. This tradition goes back to the Middle Ages, when the first measures were taken to protect single ancient monuments, such as the column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome, and it gathered momentum in the Renaissance. In 1515 for example, Raphael was appointed keeper of the antiquities of Rome: his main task was to preserve marbles with ancient inscriptions. In 1763, Johann Joachim Winckelmann was appointed prefect of the antiquities of Rome. The policy of protecting antiquities and works of art developed in stages: in 1624 an edict prohibited the exportation of objects from excavations in Rome; in 1707 another edict formulated the principle that artistic conservation is for the public good; in 1909 a law established that archaeological findings are public property. In 1939, all these principles were incorporated into a new law for the protection of artistic and historical patrimony. The first law for landscape protection – understood in terms of natural beauty rather than the historical environment – was promulgated in the same year. In 2004, a code of laws for the protection of cultural heritage and landscape was approved by Parliament.

The main principle still in force in the Italian juridical system is that things belonging to cultural heritage – monuments, works of art, and documents of historical importance – are objects of public interest, even if they are private property. Any movable or immovable property may be recognized as pertaining to public interest and, as a result, protected, meaning that it cannot be destroyed or damaged, that it cannot be in any way deprived of its cultural or historical character, and that it cannot be

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exported because of its national interest. Archaeological areas that have not yet been excavated are also protected by this law, and cannot be altered in any way, even if they are privately owned.

The Italian Constitution, promulgated in 1947, considers the conservation of the artistic and historical patrimony, as well as that of the environment, as a fundamental principle of the Republic.

For a considerable time, powers in this field have been exercised exclusively by the central administration of the State, through local offices (superintendencies). In the second half of the Twentieth century, in both Sicily and Val d'Aosta, responsibility for the protection of the artistic and historical patrimony and the environment was assumed by the regional administrations, and in the provinces of Trento and Bolzano-Bozen, it was assumed by the provincial administrations. In the same period every other region received wide responsibilities related to the environment, and in particular with regard to the protection of historical landscape. More recently, regions and local governments received power over the development of artistic and cultural heritage.

The superintendencies maintain a leading role in research, and especially in research involving archaeological excavations. Only recently (2005), a new law recognized an institutional role for university archaeology departments with regard to archaeological investigations to be undertaken prior to public works involving significant environmental impacts (i.e. «preventive archaeology»), under the overall control of superintendencies. Private professional archaeologists were granted the same rights, likewise under the control of superintendencies. The new law encompassed both the principles of the French law on the *Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives* (excavations made by public institutions) and the Dutch law regarding private professional archaeologists. The French principle of a tax to be paid to the State however, was rejected, and as a result there are direct relations between the public works contractors and the archaeologists. This approach, which involves a compromise between two different systems, has not been a good solution, because it means that public institutions become the clients of private contractors very often in strong opposition with superintendencies.

Far greater awareness of the environment and of the cultural heritage has proved to be a new and more powerful instrument of protection. A meaningful and up-to-date example of this phenomenon is the widespread public opposition to recent Government plans to build a bridge across the Straits of Messina to link Sicily with the mainland and to construct a high-speed railway in the North of Italy. People are increasingly aware that the protection of the environment is also a way to preserve urban and rural

spaces culturally and historically, and that these features are of fundamental importance for both economic, social and other reasons.

In this respect, it has recently become evident that whilst the physical decay of works of art may be arrested, that any sustained damage is irreversible. Years ago, there was a very great deal of concern about the effects of atmospheric pollution: the Archaeological Superintendence of Rome announced that the great marbles of Antiquity – monuments with sculptures and narrative reliefs – were quickly and progressively deteriorating due to accelerated chemical erosion. Marble undergoes transformation, followed by destruction, through a chemical process caused by a changing ecology and a polluted atmosphere. The sculptural reliefs were either going to be detached from their supports or they were going to decay irreversibly as a result of wind and water erosion. The process was irreversible: transformed matter cannot ever recover its original structure. Since some of the most important historical monuments of Rome were affected by these destructive processes – for example, the arches of Titus, of Septimius Severus, of Constantine, the columns of Trajan and of Marcus Aurelius – such a serious situation caused the Italian government and Rome's municipal authorities to give full consideration to the problem, and effective measures were taken both for cleaning and consolidating the monuments and for improving the environment in which the monuments were positioned. In 1978, the problem of preserving monuments from atmospheric pollution arose in Rome for the first time ever, and that year also marked the first ever stir towards environmental awareness. Today, creating a space where city life is not in collision with its historical elements, still seems to be the greatest challenge in seeking to protect our cultural patrimony.

As regards the conservation of historical features in urban areas, there is still considerable debate, both in Italy and elsewhere, about the realisation of new high quality architectural projects in ancient settings (e.g. the new building at Rome's Ara Pacis). This, however, does not seem to be a need quite as urgent as the reorganization and renovation of run down modern suburban districts.

Public institutions find it more and more difficult to purchase estates – monuments or archaeological areas – due to the excessive growth of real estate values: the protection, improvement, scientific investigation and opening to visitors of such estates are only possible through full possession. In these circumstances, gradual but increasing reductions in expenditures for research, conservation and restoration make the future of our cultural heritage even more uncertain.

The need for financial resources can lead to well-established principles for the protection and use of monuments, landscape and museums being

compromised. For example, the unrestrained diffusion of huge advertising billboards on scaffoldings erected in front of buildings and monuments under repair, aimed at earning the money necessary for the works going on, seriously undermines any protection of urban historical landscapes. For the same financial needs, museums are often induced to let out spaces, where works of art are exhibited, not only for sensible cultural activities, but also and more and more frequently for private uses such as dinners, receptions and other social events.

In the last few years, museums have become more and more connected with their geographical areas, and in particular – as a consequence of a much wider diffusion of local institutes – with smaller districts. Unfortunately, museums suffer the results of changing attitudes in national and local governments, as well as more generalised changes in public opinion. The very function of museums seems to be changing too: there is less concern about education and more attention to the promotion of tourism and other economic interests, not to mention the role museums should play in research. It has been completely forgotten, it seems, that museums are institutions of the highest importance for studies too. The most astonishing example of this attitude is given by the Egyptian Museum of Turin, which has recently been transformed into a foundation with private participation. The trustees plan to undertake a complete renovation of the institute with the aim of attracting half million tourists a year to Turin, there is no intention however, of improving its function in relation to the study of documents and works of art therein collected.

Museums suffer, perhaps much more than any other sector of our cultural patrimony, the lot being strongly commercialized. At the same time, museums are deprived of their traditional vocation as sites of education and of advanced studies.

The present Italian system clearly still keeps in force good laws for the protection of the artistic and historical patrimony, in spite of the latest measures adopted by Parliament that reduce public powers of control of the cultural heritage. At the same time however, it is also true that good laws are not always effective if not accompanied by strong cultural awareness and public opinion. This is why the role that schools may still assume in the defence of cultural heritage, ultimately, is of extreme importance